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New Social Movements, coalitions and religion: Muslim anti-war activists in Britain

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1. Introduction

This paper uses recent work on the peace and anti-war movements in Britain to explore the utility of New Social Movement (NSM) perspectives. In particular it explores the relationships between Muslim activists and 'the left'. The involvement of a challenges the political left and social movement theorists to accommodate and understand the tensions of religiosity and coalitions in heterogeneous social movements.

Thus, three key questions are asked in this paper:

1. Does the fragmentation and fracturing of contemporary social movements signal the end of NSMs?
2. How can we account for and understand Muslim involvement in anti-war movement(s) in Britain?
3. What is the utility of using NSM approaches to understand coalitions?

2. Acknowledgements and context

This paper comes from work just beginning as part of an ESRC funded project (RES-228-25-0060) on *Internet Activism: Anti-War Movements in the Information Age* with Frank Webster and Kevin Gillan (both at City University). This project runs from January 2006 to December 2007 and is based on empirical qualitative research of six case studies of anti-war groups in Britain. These include the *Stop the War Coalition*, Muslim networks, *Quakers*, CND, *Justice Not Vengeance* and *Faslane365*. Given the timeframe we are only just beginning our data collection and so the points made in this paper are based on preliminary observations and interviews.

3. New Social Movements?

The NSM approach has been productive in analysis of many social movements. I found it useful in analysis of radical environmental activism in late 1990's to help understand the networked, horizontal nature of such activism, and the importance of collective identity in its survival: in forging the ties required for collective action and vice versa – collective action constructing collective identity. The principle attraction of NSM perspectives from earlier approaches has been its focus on the *why* rather than the *how* of collective action. Moreover, the focus on collective identity, networked non-hierarchical organisation, fluidity and, crucially,

the plurality of sites of power - thus the importance of symbolic struggles and ‘challenging codes’ (Melucci, 1996) to make such sites of power visible – all provided useful concepts with which to unpack the ecological movement.

However, as been identified by others (Bagguley, 1992; Calhoun, 1995), there are many limitations to NSM approaches. Not least that the division between ‘old’ and ‘new’ movements emerging post 1960’s (and thus a rejection of the centrality of class to their motivations) is problematic given the historical linkages and continued inspirations drawn by contemporary movements of those that preceded them. Moreover, “NSM theory failed to take account of the cyclical process of movement formation, development and establishment” (Sutton and Vertigans, 2006, p.103).

The emergence of global justice movements or alter-globalisation movements with their diverse composition and re-inclusion of labour issues (such as precarity, minimum wage demands, support for workers co-operatives etc) has facilitated a shift away from NSM analysis. Many have questioned whether it is possible to define the individuals, groups and networks involved in the myriad of global justice activism as constituting a ‘movement’ or even a ‘movement of movements’ (cf. Kingsnorth, 2003). It is, in part, the diversity and scale of such alliances which has led some theorists to argue that it is not possible to build collective identity in such conditions, and consequently the construction of a collective identity is no longer core to such movements’ constitution. Moreover, others are critical of the ‘Westocentric’ orientation of social movement theories in understanding such diverse and worldwide movements (Bayat, 2005).

In its place Hardt and Negri’s re-casting of Italian Marxism and its emphasis upon class has proved popular. Moreover, the focus on autonomy within such movements owes much to Deleuze and Guattari with their writings on fluid interconnections and rhizomic structures (Pickerill and Chatterton, 2006). Hardt and Negri (2000) suggest that the multitude will rise and construct a ‘new place’ within Empire from which we however complicated, contested and fractured, can alter the everyday place and thus capitalism. They suggest,

Sometimes political theorizing runs up against obstacles that only practice can solve. Practical experiences – like the protests against the global institutions of capital in Seattle, Washington, Prague, etc - may suggest unexpected solutions ... We saw these developments as the construction of a *new place* within the dominant non-place of Empire, a new organization of the multitude... the emergence of these struggles will undoubtedly contain the lessons for our moving forward both practically and theoretically. (Hardt and Negri, 2002, p.184-5, emphasis in original)

While these concepts might help us to rethink the utility of NSM perspectives, they do not provide an alternative. Too many questions remain, not least what does the ‘multitude’ really consist of and how does it help us enact social change? Rather NSM perspectives can still offer us useful frameworks through which to explore social movements. Moreover, as Sutton and Vertigans (2006) argue, NSM perspectives have actually “opened up new opportunities for the integration of religious movements into the social movements mainstream” (p.101). We will return to the role of religion and religiosity in social movements later, but first some empirical context.

4. Fragmentation and divergence: Anti-war movement(s)

With clear historical links to the early peace and anti-nuclear movements, so often typified as NSMs, a focus on the contemporary anti-war movement(s) enables us to explore the construction, operation and fragmentation of a large and contested movement. Moreover, this movement has re-emerged and been re-constituted since the US-led 'War on Terror' was re-ignited in 2001. Thus, an estimated 1 million people (BBC, 2003) protested in London against the looming war with Iraq. Then again, on 18th March 2006, the third anniversary of the war thousands rallied demanding an end to the occupation. Such actions, and the many that have taken place in between represent an upsurge in peace campaigning in Britain and worldwide.

The contemporary anti-war movement is a broad, heterogeneous and contested alliance of a myriad of groups. There are a number of formal coalitions such as the *Stop the War Coalition* (STWC) in the UK and the *United for Peace Justice Coalition* (UFPJ) in the USA, and many other smaller groups who may oppose war but do not formally support STWCs' agenda. Crucially, while there may be commonality in the resistance to the Iraq war the broader demands and framing of these groups significantly differ. For example, on one anti-war rally in London (18th March 2006) a multitude of concerns are expressed by participants through banners and poster boards.

Thus, "some groups link their resistance to war to broader anti-imperialist struggles or to a pacifist ideology, while others believe in the necessity of war but that the specific war against Iraq was not justified" (Pickerill and Webster, 2006). Overall, it is possible to identify as many as eight themes constituting the peace/ anti-war movement(s) (cf. Pickerill and Webster, 2006):

1. There is a continuum from ideological pacificism (for example the *Society of Friends, Quakers*) to those objecting to a specific war (STWC). Thus a continuum from 'peace' to 'anti-war'.
2. There are those who link war to broader imperialist projects who think of themselves as more part of the global justice movements (such as the *Wombles*) than explicitly anti-war.
3. There is a distinction between those with a more or less direct affiliation with political projects, for example, the emergence of *Respect* as a new political party on an anti-war platform.
4. There is a strong feminist theme in peace movements notably through the *Greenham Common* camps in the 1980s (Roseneil, 1995)
5. There is significant variety in the organisational form of groups, from loose networks such as *The Network for Peace* to more centralised and hierarchical institutions.
6. There are performance/ activist groups who undertake symbolic acts (such as performances, dance or music) to challenge war such as *Rhythms of Resistance*, and *Bare Witness*.
7. There is a distinction between groups which have a broad anti-war remit and those concerned with a specific element of war, such as *CND* being anti-nuclear weapons or *Cage Prisoner* being against detention at Guantánamo Bay.
8. Finally, we can differentiate those which are predominantly religious-oriented organisations. For example, *Just Peace*, a Muslim anti-war group, and *Quakers*.

5. Religion and anti-war activism

It is the inclusion of explicitly religious groups and organisations which are of most interest here. Traditionally consideration of religion as a motivating factor in collective action or the study of religious movements has been understudied by social movement theorists (Bayat, 2005). Moreover, although there are strong historical links between the peace movement and Christianity (expressed through the *Quakers*, *Christian Peacemaker Teams*, the roots of *CND*, and many other groups) Muslim communities have only become a visible contributor in recent years. This is not to suggest that Muslim activists and groups have not been involved in peace/ anti-war campaigns but that their prominence and voice has increased dramatically in recent years. This involvement of a challenges the political left and social movement theorists to accommodate, understand and collectively move forward such a heterogeneous social movement.

Thus, a focus on religion, specifically Islam, within anti-war activism requires an understanding of two key elements: first, a mapping of Muslim anti-war activists and associated groups; and second, Muslim identity politics and its relation to political activism.

Muslim anti-war activists

By 2001 self-identified Muslims constituted 2.7% (1.6 million people) of the British population, second only to Christianity in size as a faith group (ONS, 2003). Radcliffe (2004) surmises, “the [Muslim] community is highly divided religiously and socially with sectarian, linguistic, ethnic, clan and class differences impacting upon patterns of social interaction and political organization” (p.367). Given such heterogeneity it is problematic to talk of Muslims as a community in the singular, rather there are Muslim *communities* (Modood, 2003).

This is further reflected in the array of Muslim political organisations in Britain. Many of these focus on local issues (Vertovec, 1996), but in recent years national groups have emerged such as the *Muslim Council of Britain* (MCB) [see Radcliffe, 2004 for detailed exploration of the operations of MCB], and the *Muslim Association of Britain* (MAB) to represent Muslim interests politically (through lobbying and involvement in protests) and to the media. Other groups like the *Islamic Foundation* and the *Islamic Society of Britain* focus on education, research and building bridges between Muslims’ and others. Additionally there are those groups who advocate non-participation with British politics and push a separatist agenda, such as *al-Muharijoun* and *Hisbut Tahir*.

Early involvement of Muslim communities in peace efforts can be traced to the early 1990’s when the first Gulf War triggered Muslim objection in Britain. This was followed by the Bosnian War which Saleem (2005) argues “was a watershed for Muslims in Europe because it confirmed the hypocrisy of the west. The horrific murders, torture, rapes and mass systematic killings of Muslims in Bosnia, took place in a context of western indifference, even culpability” (p.24). The US response to the events of September 2001 were met with worldwide Muslim condemnation (AbuKhalil, 2002) and aspects of this coalesced into participation in the broader anti-war movements re-emerging at that time.

On al-Jazeera on-line, the quasi independent international Arabic news channel, Shabi (2004) argued that “the protests of 3 February 2003 saw stalwart pacifists, Muslims, numerous trade union members and youngsters marching for the first time walking side by side”. However, Muslim involvement was more heterogeneous than this statement suggests. The *Muslim Association of Britain* (MAB) had a significant presence as a key coalition member of the

STWC. Its name was repeatedly associated with STWC and CND on anti-war flyers, banners and literature. This was a strategic alliance that benefited both MAB and STWC. The SWTC:

worked hard to cultivate and bring in ... those organisations that could bring a mass of Muslim people into the anti-war movement and therefore you would have meetings of Stop the War Coalition, where anything ... to scare them [Muslims] off, was prevented – it was a complete and utter party line – we don't talk about capitalism, anti-capitalism - we don't talk about direct action, ... we talk about building up a big movement of opposition to the bombing of Muslims, of businesses in Iraq. (ex-STWC activist, interview 26th February 2006)

Another activist, a Muslim, described MAB's involvement with STWC as a "*marriage de convenience*" (interview 17th March 2006) that was not liable to last very long given the internal divisions with MAB and a suspicion that STWC was more interested in gaining political advantage than necessarily understanding and supporting Muslim concerns. This suspicion belies a broader fear that Muslims were being tokenised and appropriated by other secular anti-war groups so such groups could appear inclusive and draw on broader support. However, in addition to MABs links with STWC were individual stories. Salma Yacob, a Muslim woman, became a candidate for *Respect* in Birmingham and Asad Rehman worked as MP George Galloway's assistant.

MAB, STWC and *Respect* were seen as too conservative by some Muslim's wishing to express a more radical voice, link anti-war protest to other anti-capitalist campaigns, and to take direct action. Thus other smaller and more grassroots groups emerged such as the *Muslim Public Affairs Committee* (MPAC) a civil liberties group, and *JustPeace*, "an anti-Iraq war group that promotes Muslim participation in movements that campaign for freedom from oppression and injustice" (Saleem, 2005, p.25). *Stop Political Terror* (SPT), established in December 2003 [which folded in November 2006], does not have religious affiliation but concentrates on highlighting and attempting to prevent the "the criminalisation of the Muslim community under the anti-terror laws and ... the demonisation of the Islamic faith" (SPT, 2006). Similarly *Cage Prisoner* campaigns for the release of detainees from Guantánamo Bay and for the civil liberties in the UK.

Many of these groups sought to make strong links between anti-war and Muslim oppression more broadly, seeking to link issues of poverty, marginalisation and anti-terror legislation – links which the STWC were more reluctant to make. In addition to these predominantly Muslim groups, Muslim anti-war activists were also involved in different explicitly secular groups such as the *Radical Activist Network*, an anti-capitalist network based in London and many secular anti-war groups have shown solidarity with Muslims.

Muslim identity politics

The heterogeneity of Muslim involvement in anti-war activism also highlights the contested nature of British Muslim identities. Ismail (2004) contends "the intersection of religion and identity is complex and raises important questions both in public spheres presumed to be secular and in contexts where religion is thought to play a significant role in defining the public sphere" (p.614). Many British Muslims find themselves between such contexts, contending with what it is to be British while simultaneously being influenced by their parents' homeland, their local community, and their faith. Thus, as Bagguley and Hussain

(2005) argue through their empirical work in Bradford, people construct multiple identities such as being British/Pakistani/Muslim.

These constructions, however, remain problematic for many, not least women who might choose not to wear the *hijab* or take a less literal interpretation of the *Qur'ān* (Goodwin, 2006). Thus the tension remains of how to be British *and* Muslim. For Saleem (2005), the chair of *JustPeace*, it is this conflict which is facilitating the alienation felt by some Muslim youth and creating a space for 'fundamentalism'. Thus, "in the post-colonial world, we need to consider the 'both/and' way of thinking – that it is possible to belong to both, to be part of the *umma*, the global Islamic community, *and* be British ... We refuse to make a choice" (Saleem, 2005, p.24).

This refusal to choose an identity as if it was static and unchanging has been reflected in the anti-war movement:

The Muslim community is not the same community as before the war. Even the more traditional leadership within the Muslim community has had to address the anger and demands of Muslims who have become politicised through the anti-war process. From being a heavily divided community in the past, Muslims are now coming together with the formation of new councils and alliances. The most interesting development has been the complete radicalisation of a new, young and primarily female leadership from the Muslim community. This is going to transform the community. (Rehman, quoted in Bouteldja and Rehman, 2004)

This transformation is what Tariq Ramadan refers to as the 'silent revolution' (2005) – the politicisation of second and third generation Muslims (including many women) in Britain. Ramadan identifies Muslim involvement in the British anti-war movement and their involvement in other social justice campaigns "working in the name of common values" as "evidence of new trends, a new movement that is coming out of our presence" (quoted in Reyes, 2005, p.23). In his work Ramadan advocates the need for a new form of Muslim politics which deals with the complexity of British Muslim's position. He calls for an 'ethical reform' of Islam, a contextualised re-interpretation of the key texts that is relevant to everyday lives of ordinary Muslims. Part of this 'silent revolution' is Muslims being selective and critical in what they subscribe to – from both British culture and Islamic values. Thus "the making of a British Islam is an ongoing, unfinished process of experimentation, diversity and debate" (Lewis, 2002, p.8) and this is clearly reflected in the heterogeneity of Muslim involvement in anti-war campaigns. The challenges remain for Muslim and non-Muslim activists to acknowledge these debates and the implications they have for activism: "In the past on the left you would have had to stay quiet if you believed in God ... We are forcing open a space not only within the Marxist left but also in contrast to the right-wing Islamists as well. *We have multiple identities and need multiple spaces.* Those who want to engage with us have to recognise our rights to these identities and spaces" (Rehman, quoted in Bouteldja and Rehman, 2004, emphasis added).

6. Minorities and 'the left'

This paper has outlined the context of Muslim involvement in anti-war activism in Britain. It focused on such an ethno-religious group not just because of the apparent radicalisation of some Muslim activists, or the increased prominence of Muslim voices in political arenas, but due to the challenges it poses for NSM perspectives and the traditional political left. Parallels

could be made with the anti-war movement in the US and its treatment of Black and Latino communities. Gupta (2006) argues that although different anti-war groups have minority participants such as activists rarely have any power: “UFPJ has people of color in leadership roles, [but] they often aren’t rooted in the communities they are held to represent, whereas ANSWER [Act Now to Stop War and Racism] promotes activists from directly affected communities, but they have little or no actual power” (p.68). This paper is necessarily incomplete and brief and it raises more questions than answers.

Some scholars, such as Ramadan, suggest a new movement is required to cope with such challenges: “we need a movement built on new perceptions and even new members. We need people who understand that they have to be serious about diversity ... the majority are still quite ignorant of the potential from other cultures or other religions” (quoted by Reyes, 2005, p.23). Moreover, Rehman asks “can a new concept of political movement be constructed to integrate this [Muslim] community at the front line of struggles alongside the traditional progressive left?” (quoted in Bouteldja and Rehman, 2004). This is echoed by Bayat (2005) who suggests that new theoretical concepts are required in order to understand Islamic movements and proposes the use of ‘imagined solidarities’ rather than NSM.

Yet while it might be prudent to suggest that NSM perspectives are inadequate to incorporate non-Western ideologies, or limited in aiding understanding of social movements in Muslim societies, here we are exploring anti-war activism in a European context. Here what we are really exploring are movements composed of heterogeneous coalitions. These coalitions, alliances and allegiances might be fractured and fragile, but in and of themselves they are not new. While traditionally ‘the left’ has been poor at including minority groups, NSM perspectives have always created space within their definitions for their inclusions – the loose networks, cultural frameworks, solidarity etc all support the construction of a diverse movement.

Thus the key question such an examination of anti-war activism really raises is how do coalitions work and why do we not know more about them? Does the anti-war movement face a particular challenge of heterogeneity in composition *and* aims? Does this destroy the potential of a collective identity? Or should we be celebrating the breadth of such a movement as a sign of its strength, inclusivity, and the ability for a diverse range of individuals to share commonality – even if that commonality is often tested? Crucially, it is in understanding the empirical operation of such collaborations and coalitions which I am most interested in, rather than the accuracy or definitional limits of NSM theory. Thus has the focus that NSM perspectives place upon collective identity obscured us from better understanding how such heterogeneous movements work?

7. To end with questions

- a) “Can a new concept of political movement be constructed to integrate this [Muslim] community at the front line of struggles alongside the traditional progressive left?” (Asad Rehman, quoted in Bouteldja and Rehman, 2004)
- b) How do coalitions work and why do we not know more about them? Does the anti-war movement face a particular challenge of heterogeneity in composition *and* aims?
- c) Does the incorporation of religion into social movements challenge any of our existing understandings and concepts?

- d) Does Sutton and Vertigans (2006) definition of the Radical Islam movement also apply to the anti-war movement: “it is a loosely organized ‘network of networks’ connected by a shared ideological position and the identification of a common opponent” (p.112)?
- e) How do NSM perspectives account for the inclusion/ exclusion of minority groups?
- f) What role for ‘collective identity’ in such heterogeneous movements?
- g) Has the upsurge in the peace/ antiwar movements triggered a return to the focus on the state as a core of power (though symbolic struggle is acknowledged), and if so does this challenge NSM’s concern with fluidity of sites of power?

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